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ABSTRACT

The STOP Abusive Behavior Syndrome (STOP ABS) Project attempts to implement a community-based discipline model for inner-city elementary schools that avoids both physical and emotional abuse by teachers and students, while contributing to the students' overall development. Prevailing disciplinary models either relate to children as objects to be changed (coercive), or allow children to do as they want (liberal). Based on the work of psychiatrists Franz Fanon and Wilhelm Reich, STOP ABS believes that the optimal learning environment empowers children with the tools they need to collectively change oppressive and limiting social conditions, and in the process radically refashion their own constraining social roles. A pilot program was implemented in grades 3 through 8 of the Barbara Taylor School, an independent multiracial, daycare and elementary school in Harlem, New York City (New York) that appears to have lessened incidents of abuse. A second year-long pilot project was also implemented with a class of 4- and 5-year olds. Preliminary outcomes indicate that children can articulate creative possibilities for non-abusive behavior. Goals for the 1988-89 school year include the following: (1) research into how children are socialized into an abuser-abused world view; (2) refinement of the discipline model; (3) integration of the discipline model with the curriculum; and (4) involvement of parents and community. A brief list of references is included. (FMW)

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BREAKING THE ABUSER-ABUSED PARADIGM IN THE CLASSROOM

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Breaking the Abuser-Abused Paradigm in the Classroom

This presentation explores a qualitative community-based research project whose purpose is to develop a model of discipline that is neither liberal nor authoritarian, that relates to poor and minority students as producers of change, not as victims, and that not merely provides a suitable "context" for learning, but is itself developmental. The researchers collaborate closely with the teachers and students to shape the students' activities in order to deepen our understanding of abusive behavior, to build a response to stopping abuse, and to advance the model of research. Questions being investigated are: how do children understand abuse? What is the role of the school in curing abusive behavior? What alternatives are there for the abuser/abused paradigm? And what model of community research will help effect change?

It is widely acknowledged that abusive behavior is a critical issue to be considered in the development and implementation of discipline models for the elementary school. Abuse--both physical and emotional--is rampant in contemporary society. It wreaks particular havoc in the lives of poor and minority families, where family violence and drug and alcohol abuse add geometrically to the stresses of poverty. It is, as well, a pervasive feature of the elementary school classroom.

The majority of discipline models attempt to control or manage abusive or discordant behavior. In doing so, they frequently lend themselves to abusive implementation by teachers, who find themselves engaged in a power struggle with children. In these models, discipline is seen as separate from pedagogy; more generally, learning itself is viewed as purely cognitive, having little to do with emotionality in general and abusive behavior in particular.

The purpose of the Stop Abusive Behavior Syndrome Project is to implement a discipline model for the inner city elementary school which does not make such dichotomies, one that is not merely conducive to learning, but which contributes as well to children's development. We believe that the optimal learning environment is one that empowers children, i.e., that maximizes their development as changers of their environment. Self-esteem--so important to the learning process-grows out of what one does, whether and how one is actively involved in changing the conditions of one's life. Existing discipline models relate to children either as objects to be changed (behavior to be modified) or allow children to do what they want--that is, they are either coercive or liberal. Neither model relates to children as collectively capable of changing their learning environment, i.e., as fundamentally social. And thus they do not contribute maximally to their intellectual and social development.

Contemporary social science research indicates that how people act (indeed, how people think and feel) is not private in origin and thereby ontologically personal, but rather is societally and historically based. How social and interpersonal relations are organized in a given society impacts profoundly on emotionality, cognition and social relations in the everyday life of individuals.

This issue has been a major thematic in the historical evolution of clinical and social psychology. Some of the most seminal research and analysis was conducted by two noted psychiatrists, Frantz Fanon and Wilhelm Reich, both of whom practiced and wrote during periods of great social destabilization and extreme repression--periods characterized by veritable pandemics of abuse. In his early writings on the mass psychology of fascism, Reich (1970) asked how it was possible for a civilized, cultured society like Germany before the rise of Hitler to transform so profoundly that it came to embrace, seemingly overnight, the mythic and anti-human world view that led to the genocide of more than six million Jews, gay people, communists, and gypsies. His explanation--one that we do not share yet which contained important insights--was that the human character structure contains within it the potentiality--latent during "normal" periods--towards authoritarianism and fascism. The ideology merely preys on this latent strain towards fascism, creating the ideological and societal conditions for it to emerge in full bloom.

Fanon, the Martiniquian psychiatrist who became active in the Algerian war for independence in the 1960's, believed that authoritarian, anti-human attitudes and violence were not characterological but societally produced. His work with Algerians during the war--both those tortured and those who were the torturers--was the basis for his premise that one effect of colonialism is that the oppressed internalize the role of the oppressor. We agree with Fanon that interpersonal relations--including violence, abuse, and anti-social behavior--are socially produced (1963). So too, are the <u>pro-social</u> interpersonal relations that get expressed when people collectively break out of their societal roles as victims and objects of change and take on their historical role as changers.

Buttressed by our experience as mental health and education professionals, we believe, with Fanon and Reich, that human beings --children and adolescents as well as adults--can be empowered with the tools they need to collectively change oppressive and limiting social conditions, and in the process radically refashion their own constraining social roles (Holzman, 1987). The ongoing research into developing tools of empowerment as a vital component of altering social relations and conditions that give rise to abuse is critical in a society such as the contemporary U.S., where physical and psychological abuse is the rule of schools. It is within this framework that the Stop ABS project investigates elementary school children's experience with and understanding of abusive behavior as they participate in the difficult process of creating an abuse-free school.

In a pilot program at the Barbara Taylor School, an independent multiracial, daycare and elementary school in Harlem for children ages 2½-13, the Stop ABS Project was implemented intially in grades 3-8. Activities were structured with the intention of building an environment where alternatives to abusive behavior could be collectively created. The topic of abuse was introduced as a growing social problem in the world, in their communities and within the schools. Initial group activities included the collective discussing and listing of ways that students are abused by teachers, how students are abusive to each other, and how students are abusive to their teachers. LaCerva, one of the researchers, and the students wrote skits based on the examples the children gave. The skits depicted scenes of abuse (e.g., one child grabbing another child's arm, a teacher angrily "losing control" and verbally abusing a child, etc.). The entire class, with the facilitation of Strickland (the teacher) and LaCerva, talked about how the situation could have been dealt with differently, and subsequently acted out the changed skit with a non-abusive ending. The children and teaching staff quickly learned that there were alternatives to being abusive.

Though incidents of abuse lessened inside the classroom, they were by no means eliminated. What is the relationship between how the children were learning to articulate what is abusive and to verbally present alternatives to abusive behavior and their behavior remaining (although to a lesser extent) abusive?

A second pilot project was a year-long daily social-therapeutically oriented "group time" implemented in the class of 4-5 year olds. These children and their teachers gradually built a group environment where the children learned to talk about their lives and their emotions, with the aim of "reorganizing emotionality" from a situation of either repressing emotions or being overdetermined by them and "acting out" into a tool they can use in the learning process. We teach children that their development doesn't just "happen" but is collectively produced (with themselves being critical producers of it). This includes how they "do" emotionality, learning and social relationships with peers and others. The prevailing emoitonality that is produced is too often degrading, impotent, non-growthful, and painful, in large part growing out of the deep-rooted racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and individualism that characterize contemporary U.S. society.

Outcomes

Preliminary findings include the fact that children can articulate creative possibilities for non-abusive behavior at the same time as they participate in being abusive with one another and the teachers. It is important to understand the social origins of this gap between their articulation and their practice and begin to bridge it. For example, children as young as four already seem committed to an "abuser-abused paradigm," i.e., that one is either an abuser or one is abused. Abusive behavior often covers the feelings of humiliation and anger children experience when they feel inadequate or frustrated.

Through the activity of developing a model of an "abuse free" school, it became clear that inner city elementary school children can learn to intervene on abusive situations, if they can experience themselves as capable of building environments that are nurturing and supportive. During this project the children showed themselves able, not only to learn and develop in their classroom and school, but to provide leadership to others in the endeavor.

Expanded Project

An expanded anti-abuse program is envisaged, as part of the process of developing a progressive and effective discipline model that itself is not abusive. With greater resources, the program will include intensive study of American history with a focus on the development of those social and cultural institutions which perpetuate abusive behavior. As well, the more active enlistment of the parents in this effort is expected to dramatically augment the initial results of the pilot study.

Over the 1988-89 school year we plan to:

1) Deepen our understanding of how children are socialized to an abuser-abused world view. Our observation strongly suggest that even children as young as four function with the belief that abuse is the feature around which social and interpersonal relationships revolve, that one can either be abusive or be abused.
2) Create and refine a discipline model that nurtures the children's collective ability to build the learning context that enables them to express their humanity and decency, thus breaking through the abuser-abused world view.
3) Integrate the discipline model into the entire curriculum through reading and role playing, collective writing, and other activities.
4) Involving parents and community members in the program.

The project involves close collaboration between researchers and the teaching staff through:

a. classroom observation;
b. interviews with students, teachers and parents;
c. consultation with teachers leading to training and development of intervention strategies. The goal is to develop the teachers so they can provide a model of how to interact socially outside the abuser-abused world view;
d. utilization of existing structures, such as parent-staff meetings, to involve, inform, and develop collaboration between parents, teachers and researchers.

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